



Making Family Connections

Children's interests and needs are best met when child care providers communicate, plan and problem-solve with parents. However, many providers find that the desire to form meaningful partnerships with parents does not always match what actually happens. Many are searching for strategies to help them develop genuine give-and-take relationships with the parents of children in their programs.

The secret to effective partnerships with parents is to work together in the best interest of the child. This includes developing a relationship where you learn from parents and parents learn from you. This important relationship is particularly significant when children have heightened physical, medical, or emotional needs.



Certain issues can weaken or get in the way of developing effective partnerships with parent. Either of you may be operating from a traditional model where teachers are "experts" and the parent's role is to learn from the teacher and support his or her decisions. A give-and-take relationship can also suffer when providers don't share information and their observations with parents. Feelings of competition or an inability to accept child-rearing differences may also impact parents and providers working together.

Following is a list that can help you ensure that parent partnerships occur in your program.

- ♦ **Respect** the parent's role and get information about children and family's culture and values.
- ♦ **Share** your experiences and observations.
- ♦ **Recognize** feelings or thoughts that you are the "expert" and try to **collaborate** instead of lecture.
- ♦ **Communicate** important information even if you are afraid you will hurt the parents' feelings or make them angry.
- ♦ **Enjoy** conversation and conference times to seek parent input rather than give a report.
- ♦ **Work** with parents to set mutual goals for the child, establish effective strategies, and measure progress toward achieving goals.
- ♦ **Be aware** of any attitudes or biases you might have regarding families different from your own and understand that all family types can be healthy and successful.
- ♦ **Realize** and accept that parental involvement will vary according to individual parent schedules, beliefs and needs.
- ♦ **Encourage** a range of involvement knowing that there will be some who work hard to simply get their child to a your program on a regular basis and other who may attend every parent meeting and even volunteer their time.
- ♦ **Be conscious** of any judgment you might have to those who are different from you and **celebrate** varying family cultures, beliefs and parenting practices.
- ♦ **Form** a relationship with each family.
- ♦ **Empower** parents to ask questions, access services and be the best they can be.

Parents are the most important influence in a child's life; they have a wealth of knowledge about their children to share and benefit you. In turn, your insights about a child can support a parent's role as well as enhance the child's success in both environments. True partnership benefits parents, child care professionals, and most of all, children.

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A Child Care Provider's Question

What do I do when a parent wants me to use teaching or guidance strategies that do not fit with accepted early childhood practice?

It is important to remember that a partnership means shared decision-making. When parents and providers disagree, respectful communication is the key to developing a shared decision and plan. You can start by exploring the issue with the parent to find out why it is important to the family and to share the reasons for your current practices. Understanding each other's perspective is essential to the shared decision-making process. Sometimes, parents and providers are really promoting the same goal and the process ends with a meaningful conversation. Other times, there are deeper concerns and you may need to develop a plan together for exploring the concern. Occasionally, you might see the appropriateness of a parent goal and decide to adapt your program accordingly.

When there really is a difference in beliefs—such as when the family values completing a task over allowing child choices— you can use the following process:

- ♦ **Seek a compromise** that allows you to embed some of the parent's goal into your daily routine without violating your philosophy, such as implementing a planning process with the children at play time so they can practice making choices and then encourage following through.
- ♦ **Agree to Disagree**— This is particularly useful when

different approaches will not hinder a child's success, such as allowing the child to choose among play areas in your program and work task completion skills at home.

- ♦ **Examine the fit between what the child needs and the child care environment** by talking openly about similarities and differences or beliefs. Often you will find that there is enough in common to support the child's best interests. Sometimes you find that your differing opinions are getting in the way and/or the fit is not working for the child. When this is agreed upon, enlist help by using the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency in your area. This situation is not about who is "right" or "wrong," rather it is an opportunity to recognize and accept that there are a wide range of family styles and practices and diversity in child care programs.



Resources:

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning
<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards
<http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php>

Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices
<http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>

Training Opportunities:

The Registry Training Calendar
<https://www.the-registry.org>

WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar
<http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/>

MECA Special Needs Support Program (SNSP)
<http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/meca/snsp/default.htm>

This document is a modification of the *Working with Parents: Do's and Don't* tip sheet created by Montana Child Care plus+,
<http://www.ccplus.org/Products.html>. This document was modified for use by the State of Wisconsin.

Race to the Top –ELC is a cross-departmental grant that uses the talent, experience, and vision of three Wisconsin state department: Department of Children and Families, Public Instruction, and Health Services. The contents of this document were developed under the RTTT-ELC grant. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Federal Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement